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Preparing Students to Study Abroad in the Netherlands

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オランダへ留学する学生に対する事前教育

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要 旨

英語を媒介言語とした教育プログラムを実践している大学への留学を希望する学生にとって、ヨーロッパは新たに注目されている留学先である。本稿ではオランダの二大学の授業観察およびその大学の教職員と学生に対するインタビューに基づき、長崎国際大学のグローバルツーリズムコースのカリキュラム改善について論じる。また、オランダの大学へ留学する学生の選抜に関する提案も行う。

キーワード

留学、オランダ

Abstract

Europe is an emerging destination for students wishing to study abroad at universities with English-medium programs of instruction. The authors observed classes at two universities in the Netherlands. Based on these observations and interviews with staff and students, the authors discuss ways to improve the Global Tourism course curriculum at Nagasaki International University. They also present considerations for selecting students to study abroad in the Netherlands.

Key words

Study abroad, Netherlands

1. Introduction

Studying abroad can be an exciting and impactful educational experience. Among the many opportunities it provides, students have a chance to improve language skills, learn about different cultures, and gain skills for a future career. Students at Nagasaki International University have the opportunity to study abroad in several countries, such as the

USA, U.K., Canada, and the Netherlands. Students who study in these countries attend colleges and universities, enrolling in either an English language programs or a regular course of study. Although English is not the first language in the Netherlands, students are able to study in English-medium programs there. Moreover, according to Huang (2006), offering professional and academic pro-

grams in English is a common practice in the Netherlands dating back as early as the 1950s. In whatever country students choose to study abroad, they are likely to face challenges in adapting to their new cultural, linguistic, and educational environment.

One factor in overcoming these challenges could be how similar or different the education system is to the one in the student's home country. While programs at partner schools in North America or the U.K. are not identical to classes at NIU, there is a classroom-based model of instruction. In some cases, students who study in these countries experience more emphasis on areas such as group discussion or have opportunities to gain practical experience in an on campus restaurant. In such cases, the difference is one of degree. At NIU, there are teachers from North America who are able to prepare students based on their own previous experiences. NIU has recently partnered with two universities of applied science in the Netherlands. Students who study at these institutions are likely to encounter greater differences in the style of education. Moreover, no faculty or staff have

first-hand experience with the Dutch education system, which means that they are less equipped to prepare students for the unique challenges students might face when studying in the Netherlands.

Higher education in the Netherlands comprises two types of universities: universities and universities of applied science (UAS). Whereas universities may focus more on research and theoretical knowledge, UAS offer education that is more directly tied to professional industries. UAS originated as professional training schools, and through a series of government reforms in the 1980s, the schools amalgamated into larger UAS offering four year undergraduate and graduate programs (de Weert & Leijnse, 2010). UAS offer training programs in which knowledge is applied through practical skills in collaboration with industry to ensure that students are provided with training that will be relevant to their future careers. The European Network for Applied Sciences Universities (2009) states that UAS transform the traditional knowledge triangle (comprised of education, research, and innovation) into a dia-

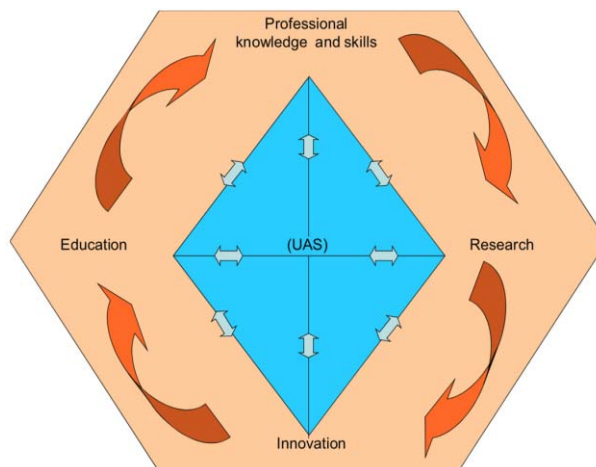


Figure 1. *The knowledge diamond - the augmented knowledge triangle*

mond by adding a fourth category: professional knowledge and skills (Figure 1). The UAS model is especially prevalent in the Netherlands. As of 2012, 40 of 53 universities in the Netherlands were UAS (ENASU, 2012). “In 2007, out of a total of about 586,500 higher education students, 65% were enrolled in UASs (374,500), against 35% (212,000) in universities. This nearly 2:1 balance in favour of the UASs is much higher than the OECD averages and higher than in most other countries with a binary structure,” (de Weert & Leijnse, 2010, p.200). This demonstrates the degree to which the UAS model is representative of the Dutch higher education system.

2. The Global Tourism Course

The Global Tourism course at Nagasaki International University is an English intensive specialization within the Department of International Tourism. In the first three semesters students enroll in a suite of intensive English classes designed to develop the necessary language and academic skills for study abroad and a future career in a globalized world. Students study abroad two times in the first two years. The first study abroad is for one month in the summer after the first semester. The second study abroad is in the fourth semester for a period of one to two semesters. Upon returning to NIU in the 3rd year, students transition away from studying English only as a foreign language to studying tourism-related courses in English together with international students at NIU. Students also have the option to take seminar classes in English in which they complete their undergraduate thesis in English.

As mentioned above, the goals of the GT course are twofold: linguistic and academic.

A detailed description of these goals was provided previously by Van Deusen et al. (2017). The first three semesters consist of four classes: Reading, Writing, Practical A (speaking and presentations), and Practical B (vocabulary and academic skills). Students are admitted to the GT course regardless of their language level. As a result, the classes focus on providing constant and timely individual feedback and promoting personal growth in the students. Each student's language level is measured via the CASEC test with the goal of increasing each student's TOEIC score by an average of 50 points per semester.

One reason why the GT course has been able to see positive results in cohorts which consist of students with vastly different language abilities could be that the assignments focus on developing academic skills. In the Writing classes, for example, both high- and low-level students are fairly unfamiliar with basic conventions of academic composition. In Practical A, most students have limited experience giving presentations or speaking freely in English. Another way in which individual growth is promoted is through personalization of assignments. In the reading classes, students freely choose books for Extensive Reading. In Practical B, students study personalized vocabulary lists. Finally, all classes emphasize the qualities of time management, personal responsibility, and active communication with teachers. These efforts are designed to develop in students the language and academic skills for a successful study abroad and career in a global society.

After completing the first three semesters of intensive English training, students have various options for studying abroad. Stu-

dents with lower language ability study abroad in pre-sessional English language programs. On the other hand, students with a high enough IELTS score may choose to study regular classes alongside local and international students in the degree program. Students who are in the middle may, where possible, do a mix of EFL and academic classes or begin in a pre-sessional program for one semester before moving on to take regular classes. The first two semesters of the GT course culminate in taking the IELTS test which helps determine the course of study abroad student may consider.

3. Visiting Partner Universities in the Netherlands

Nagasaki International University currently has exchange agreements with two universities of applied science in the Netherlands, Saxion and NHTV. Both institutions offer degree courses in English in fields related to hospitality. In addition, Saxion offers a pre-sessional English program while NHTV does not. Dutch universities of applied science are four-year universities which offer highly specialized and practical training to prepare students for careers in their chosen field. Assignments are often based on group projects and collaboration with industry on real-world projects is common. A generally high standard of English ability in Dutch society means that students and industry can communicate in English. Students who graduate from Dutch high schools are recognized by Dutch universities as holding a level equivalent to IELTS 6.0 and may be admitted to English-medium programs without further proof of language ability. Although students in the GT course will have experienced group pro-

jects in English and some communication with professional industry in Japanese, the nature of the Dutch UAS programs is likely to present a level of rigor beyond what they have experienced or could easily expect. Moreover, the faculty members of the GT course are also unfamiliar with the Dutch system. Therefore, to better prepare students for studying in the Netherlands, the authors visited both schools in February 2017 to learn more.

In February 2017, two of the authors visited both the Leisure Academy at NHTV for one day and the pre-sessional English program at Saxion for two days. At NHTV, the authors observed an imagineering class, a Tourism English class, and met with faculty of the Leisure Academy to learn more about the curriculum and education system. At Saxion, the authors observed an academic reading class in the pre-sessional English program, met the Director of Studies of the pre-sessional English program, and met two international students in the program. All meetings with staff and international students were conducted on campus. These meetings were audio recorded and written consent was obtained from the participants.

4. Results

When considering study abroad to the Leisure Academy at NHTV, a fundamental aspect is to understand how the curriculum is structured. All first-year students do a foundation year of study. This is designed to provide students with practical understanding of core topics such as economics or market research through completing project-based modules. In year two, students select one of four tracts of specialization related to leisure management. In the third and fourth years,

students also have opportunities to study abroad, do internships, and select a minor before completing their final graduation project. At each stage of the degree program, students are working on projects and connected to real companies. Students from NIU who study abroad in the Leisure Academy would need to enrol in second year courses because foundation year courses are not available to international exchange students. On the one hand, since Dutch students do not begin specializing until the second year, NIU students would be joining classes at what could be considered a common beginning point, i.e., the first module of specialization. On the other hand, NIU students would be expected to have at a reasonably competent level regarding the content of the foundation year and the Dutch method of education. This differs from most of NIU's other partner schools where exchange students have more freedom of choice over which classes they want to take, and the method often consists of classroom-based learning. As a result, this requires special attention when considering study abroad to NHTV.

Another important aspect to understand is the nature of the coursework. From the first day, courses center around group projects that aim to solve real problems faced by local companies and organizations. The authors observed a lecture class of over 50 students in which students were preparing to visit a local brewery. The goal of the project was to provide advice on how to improve the guest experience of the brewery tour. The top group in the class would be able to present directly to the brewery. Another project described to the authors was called the *Human Capital Project*. A youth dance festival was

seeking ways to build a sustainable community of volunteers. The students were required to work with the organization and produce an advisor report that could be implemented. Another project described to the authors required students to create a plan for a local swimming pool which had gone bankrupt. Because projects focus on real issues faced by companies, projects often change year by year. Staff at NHTV described how companies take on a role similar to a client. Although it is sometimes necessary to temper client expectations, the students are expected to produce a solution that is useful for the client. Classes are often integrated to work on a common project. For this reason, the timetable does not follow a set weekly schedule, but rather certain classes are held depending on what stage of the project students are currently working on. Students are responsible for keeping up to date with the class schedule.

Completing these projects requires students to make use of various professional skills and knowledge. In some cases, these will have been learned in the foundation year or subsequent courses. Students are required to incorporate research elements as well as concepts from lectures. In certain cases, extra curricular workshops on topics not covered in class, such as statistics or financial management, are held for students. Finally, working effectively within a group is important. Group members are expected to contribute equally and groups are expected to demonstrate initiative for completing the project. Teachers sometimes join group meetings where they gather status updates, answer questions, and provide support. The issue of group work and the challenges faced by inter-

national students will be discussed more below.

The pre-sessional English program at Saxion offers up to two semesters of study. Students with IELTS 5.0 or above can enrol for two semesters; students with IELTS 5.5 can enroll for one. Enrollment in the regular course of study requires either IELTS 6.0 or successful completion of the pre-sessional program. The pre-sessional course aims to provide students with the language, academic, and cultural skills required to succeed in the regular course of study.

The authors observed a reading class, consisting of 12 international students sitting in groups of four. The main topic of the class was how to use written sources for research. In the previous lesson, students were tasked with paraphrasing extracts of research papers. Students were provided with thorough examples of phrases for introducing, paraphrasing, and linking topics. Throughout the program, student write reading logs which begin as highly scaffolded worksheets for summarizing reading content. By the end of the program, the goal is for students to be able to take their own notes on blank sheets of paper. In the class we observed, the students learned how to use their paraphrases in constructing the literature review section of a research paper. The students learned about correct citation methods and how to position research with a literature review.

In a more in depth discussion, the Director of Studies described the pre-sessional program to the authors. Despite the fact that scores of IELTS 5.0 and 6.0 are required to enter the pre-sessional program and regular program respectively, the Director of Studies explained that explicit references to IELTS were removed from the program curriculum

for two reasons. The first reason is that students can enter the regular program by successfully completing the pre-sessional program only. Also, the skills required to succeed in the regular program go beyond what can be measured on the IELTS. The Director of Studies stated that it is not uncommon for international students with sufficient language ability who bypass the pre-sessional program to struggle to adapt to the Dutch education environment and its requirements due to a lack of such skills. In this way, the Director of Studies described the presence of IELTS in the curriculum of the pre-sessional program as more of a distraction than a benefit.

The authors interviewed one male student from Libya and one female student from China who described the benefits they received from the pre-sessional program. Student M, from Libya, currently studies International Business at Saxion. Before this, he studied English in South Africa and achieved IELTS 5.5. He spent one semester in the pre-sessional program. In particular, academic writing was a weak point for this student and the pre-sessional program helped him understand how to write research reports, use APA style, and learn the university's learning management system. Furthermore, his experience prepared him for the workload of his current program and the style of projects, which involve making connections with real companies to address real issues.

Student C, from China, joined the pre-sessional English program after studying at a university in China and achieving IELTS 5.0. She described her English level at that time as being able to listen and read, but not able to speak or write. Although her ability in all

four skills improved during her two semesters in the pre-sessional program, she described the biggest change as adapting to the Dutch education system. She described the Chinese system as one in which students are expected to be passive and follow the teacher; whereas, in the Netherlands, students are expected to be independent and actively ask questions. In this way, she feels that the pre-sessional program taught her how to study and be successful in her current major. She occasionally sees other international students who are shy and passive struggle with the educational demands of her program. Typically, there are one or more assignments due each week. Late submission results in a failing grade. For her projects, she was responsible for finding a company willing to work with her. Despite being rejected by several companies, she had no other option but to persevere until she found one. Moreover, in group projects, a student who does not complete work to an adequate standard can result in the entire group failing. For this reason, groups have a student contract and students who are not accountable to the group receive warnings and can ultimately be removed from the group by other members.

How does the pre-sessional program prepare students for academic study in the Netherlands? The Director of Studies explained that the program focuses on developing in students discrete skills that can be scaffolded, linked together, and demonstrated through projects that require increasing levels of complexity and autonomy. Projects are research-focused and mirror the expectations that are placed on students in the regular program. Hence, the reading class described above can be linked to various formats of academic writ-

ing, such as persuasive or problem/solution essays. Presentations on research are also taught. Teacher expectations concern not only these types of products, but also how students conduct themselves. Thus, autonomy is a key skill for students to develop. Although teachers address certain language points in class as necessary, students are expected to improve their grammar and vocabulary mainly through asking questions and completing a self-study program.

Following instructions, working effectively with others, and completing tasks on time are examples of other such skills emphasized in the program. The Director of Studies described a speaking activity that is conducted early in the pre-sessional program to develop these skills. Students are assigned a task of gathering information from a certain number of students within an allotted amount of time. Inevitably, there are cases when students do not finish because some of the more verbose students in the class consume all of a student's time. These students fail the assignment. This is used as an opportunity for students to learn about the Dutch education system. Incomplete or late assignments receive a failing grade. Students need to pay close attention to instructions. Students are responsible for managing themselves and group members to ensure that assignment goals are achieved. Such activities are a safe way for students to learn through failure, while understanding that what is valued and expected in the Dutch education system might be different to their home country.

5. Discussion

Based on the data collected on our visit to Dutch partner schools, we can identify certain

areas of sympatico between these schools and the GT course curriculum. One area is autonomous learning. Students are required to work autonomously on areas related to vocabulary, blogging, online listening, and extensive reading. Students understand that this is valuable because they receive regular feedback and assessment based on this activity. Core academic skills and groupwork are also learned in GT. Students gather and information, discuss with other classmates, and report their ideas in various written and oral formats. Another area is personal responsibility. In GT, students are expected to keep deadlines. Late or incomplete work is penalized. Students with unsatisfactory performance do not receive credit for classes. In one sense, GT provides students a safe place to learn from failure. In some cases, students who do not demonstrate a willingness to improve are unfortunately required to leave the program. On the other hand, students of any language level can achieve high scores. This is because assignments have clear rubrics that are process-based. Students who actively communicate with the teachers, demonstrate initiative, and ask questions are rewarded.

There are several ways in which the GT course curriculum could be improved based on information gained from our Dutch partners. One area would be to include more projects that require students to collaborate with businesses or organizations. In the second semester, students make a video introducing aspects of a local theme park in English. They are required to communicate with the park staff regarding access for recording sessions. Although this could be considered a form of collaboration, the GT course does not currently have projects in which students help

companies to solve problems. Another area to consider would be better preparing students to challenge each other's ideas and respond appropriately. Based on our interviews and observations, it appears that student-student and teacher-student interactions in Dutch classrooms contain more forms of constructive conflict than in Japan. On projects, we include peer-assessment and constructive feedback. Our challenge is to begin incorporating elements of this in daily classroom communication and for this to be perceived as valuable rather than threatening. Finally, it would be tempting to include more practice in IELTS to raise students scores, especially since most students in the GT course achieve scores in the IELTS 4.5 - 5.5 range. The data from our visit suggests though that IELTS is a necessary but insufficient area of student preparation for study abroad. Further emphasis on this test might risk detracting from developing the other skills necessary to have a successful study abroad.

In addition to improving the GT curriculum, the data provides insight into the type of students who might be best suited to study abroad on exchange in the Netherlands. As has been discussed above, one criterion is certainly a student's IELTS level. This is important because partner institutions are sometimes provided a certain degree of leeway in sending students abroad who may not have achieved the requisite IELTS score. It goes without saying that home institutions must do their due diligence in selecting candidates, but in lieu of the required IELTS score, exchange agreements occasionally make provisions for students who are at an equivalent level (for example CEFR B2) based on the judgement of the home institution. Accord-

ing to IELTS, CEFR B2 covers IELTS bands 5.5 to 6.5. Considering that IELTS 6.5 is a common level for graduate school programs, this demonstrates the wide range that is covered by the B2 level.

In the GT course, students take the IELTS at the end of their first year, which is six months before the beginning of studying abroad. It might be tempting to project a higher score onto a students in the future, especially if the student is motivated and diligent. Such students could be encouraged to take the test again to achieve actual results. Considering all of the challenges facing international students discussed above, attainment of the necessary language level is a minimum requirement that should not be compromised if at all possible. On the contrary, students who have achieved IELTS 6.0 seem likely to benefit from doing one semester in a pre-session course to get their bearings in a new country. Moreover, for students with IELTS 5.0 or 5.5 who are looking to improve their English skills in a challenging environment, doing a study abroad that consists entirely of enrolling in the pre-session program in the Netherlands could be a worthwhile experience.

Another area to consider when a student expresses interest in studying abroad in the Netherlands is compatibility with the program. Some NIU students who study abroad expect to be able to freely choose their classes, which could consists of few or no tourism-related classes at all. Students who join the regular program in the Netherlands would halve much more limited choices. In exchange for this, students who are interested in those courses would receive an opportunity otherwise unavailable to them in Japan and,

perhaps, many other countries.

If a student has the necessary language level and has determined that the program is compatible with their interests and goals, preliminary contact with the university is advisable. It is suggested that video conferencing would be an ideal means for this. This would be the first opportunity for the student and host institution to confirm that, in fact, studying abroad would be in the best interest of both parties. It presents an opportunity for the university to check the language level of the student. It also allows the student to better understand the content of the courses, types of assignments, and general aspects of the educational environment. It would be an opportunity for each party to ask questions and communicate important information which might not be easily conveyed in promotional materials or by email. The goal would be to ensure that both the student and university are satisfied that expectations regarding language proficiency and the curriculum can be met.

Another reason to hold a video conference between the student and the university would be to identify any gaps in the student's knowledge or skills that could reasonably be bridged in the intervening time before arrival. If the student is lacking in a key area, such as basic knowledge of finance or budgeting, they could take steps to learn about that area by registering for a course or through self study. If teachers in the GT course are made aware of this, that could inform future curriculum design. Another option would be to incorporate aspects of the area that the student is lacking into an existing GT project on an ad hoc basis. As students in GT have a certain degree of flexibility with project outcomes, it

is reasonable to assume that GT teachers would likely accommodate such a request.

6. Conclusion

Sending GT students to study abroad in the Netherlands presents unique challenges and opportunities. Achieving a score of IELTS 6.0 is the most obvious barrier to studying in the Netherlands, but that alone is no guarantee of a successful study abroad experience. Although it might be tempting to focus even more on raising students IELTS scores, there is a risk that further emphasis on IELTS could come at the expense of developing in students the personal and academic skills which are expected of all students who study there. For students who do go on to study there, they can expect to be challenged and grow in ways that are not common in Japanese education. The GT course offers training to prepare students to meet these challenges, especially in the areas of autonomous learning, academic skills, group work, and personal responsibility. To better prepare students, the curriculum could be adjusted to include more opportunities for collaboration with business and constructive conflict in class.

For students who wish to study abroad, this paper has suggested steps to take to ensure that all parties can be satisfied with the exchange. Students should have the necessary language skills required by the host school. Students and the host institution should initiate lines of communication before the application process to confirm that the student and university program would be an appropriate match. If this is the case, the student may need to acquire additional skills

and knowledge. Finally, a pre-sessional program could function as a way to make transitioning to a study abroad much smoother for students or it could constitute the entire study abroad for students whose language level is not high enough to join the regular academic program.

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